FAME

FAME KILLS; BUT NOT often enough.

McCartney could have taken the bullet, but no, it had to be Lennon. Fame could at least have taken Yoko, but maybe fame doesn't think much of that kind of fame. Clapton might have usefully choked on his own vomit, having played his last inspired guitar solo, but Hendrix, with who knows what lost worlds still inside him, was the one to go. Kurt Cobain dies; Phil Collins thrives. It seems to be the sad case that those most deserving of fame are those least capable of surviving it. The immortals.

Fame prefers it that way, fame exacts a terrible price for its ultimate reward. More to the point fame knows we prefer it that way. When it comes to fame, no cliché is too hackneyed. Our favourite stars are young and dead. Stars that burn brightest before collapsing in on themselves. Black holes into which we can pour our own fantasies of self-destruction. Of course, there are the bacchanalian *bon vivants* (Keith Moon, John Bonham – funny how drummers come into their own here – or Bon Scott, or even Jimmy Page, who isn't dead but does a brilliant impression), Icarus in Doctor Martens to a man. They perish not of too much sensitivity, but from a gleeful and ebullient lack of it. But these are mere rock'n'roll diversions; they may command our lower instincts, but our hearts, minds and genitals are with the tortured souls, whose deaths are way, way more sexy.

You think this is bullshit? As of the time of writing, a young man of 28 has been missing for a month – one of 1000s who vanish every month. Curiously, none of the others have been accorded a two-page spread in the Sunday Times. Richey James' disappearance was marked, not in the news pages, nor even in the supplement nominally devoted to the arts, but in the Style & Travel section. How appallingly appropriate on both counts.

Difficult as it is to admit, especially for those of us who have met and liked Richey, we love our martyrs. And if Richey turns up alive and well, there will be some who will genuinely feel a little let down. Not least the editors of the Sunday Times.

And if, God forbid, he doesn't, then we'll look for someone else. The candidates? Eddie Vedder? Troubled, but too robust. Courtney Love? Also troubled, some might even say disturbed, but quite plainly indestructible. Another Manic? Not even fame could be that unfair. There is clearly only one serious contender. Spindly, spiteful, wracked with self-loathing – and soon to be so before the eyes of millions. Another fiercely burning star, destined to go nova and implode. Another black hole into which to tip our most grievous emotions, and see them dazzle. He will allow us to believe that our most mundane and commonplaces tragedies – the day our girlfriend binned us, the night our boyfriend stumbled home reeking of someone else's sweat – are cosmically, stratospherically glamorous.

THOM Yorke, 26, looks the part. He's short, delicate, fey, but unlike Kurt and Richey, the first two corners in this necrophiliac love triangle, he's not pretty. On stage, particularly, he resembles a punk gargoyle. But he is sexy. And crucially, he is vulnerable. He is more than vulnerable. Watching him twist and convulse, howling that he's "*Better off dead*", you are left with the feeling that he is trying to beat himself up before anyone else can get the chance. Instantly, you are impressed with the sense of his nihilism – something which almost everyone tells us is the *zeitgeist*. On paper, Thom looks like a fine prospect, another martyr in the making, another young blade ready to slash himself to pieces.

> **'I resent beauty. And when I say beauty, I'm not referring to men. Confronted by a beautiful woman, I will leave as soon as possible, or hide in a corner until they leave. I've never met a single beautiful woman I've actually liked' – Thom Yorke**

Too fast to live, too young to die, eh? Another reckless nihilist, who has, with some panache, turned up just when nihilism is all the vogue. Of course, nihilism always has been in vogue in rock'n'roll, in much the same way that Christ has always been a big hit with the Christians. It's just that it feels so right at the moment, what with things being the way they are.

Thom Yorke, 26, is already marked for destruction. But Thom doesn't see it that way. And frankly, neither do we.

In October 1994, Thom had this to say about Kurt's death, Richey's hospitalisation, Sinead O'Connor's savage self-flagellation:

"I'm sure there is a zeitgeist. There must be. You could see it happen with the Manics for a while. And I suppose for the past two years there was nothing we could have written about either. . . The stuff we've been going through is mind altering. Emotionally and things. That sounds really over-dramatic, like we're playing up to it, but we're not really."

Today, seated in the luxury of the Randolf Hotel bar in his hometown of Oxford – a milieu soon to be set upon by what EMI describe as "The cream of the world's rock press"; a terrifying thought – Thom is characteristically gloomy, but a million optimistic miles from desperation.

"I love life," he avers. "I really do. But there's so much shit to deal with. Like, I have friends who are artists. Good artists. Maybe even great artists. But they're at the end of their tethers. What with the dole, the poverty, they just don't have the energy to carry on. When we started this thing, I really did believe, 'The good will out. The best rises to the top'. But I no longer believe that. People are continuously overlooked and ignored. You only have to watch the news to know that. It's not just artists. It's everybody."

But Thom isn't one of them. The reason half the Pepe LePunks of Europe and beyond are descending upon Oxford is because Radiohead are this year expected to go mega on the back of "The Bends", the John Leckie-produced follow-up to their 1.5 million-selling debut LP, "Pablo Honey". The bends are the potentially fatal pressure changes in the bloodstream as a diver rises too fast from deep water to air. Pretty self-explanatory as titles go, we reckon.

"Pablo Honey" was wimp rock with teeth. In terms of sensitivity and rage, "The Bends" – an album that will do what everybody seems to be predicting and catapult Radiohead towards a U2-type of fame and acclaim (although that's an unfortunate comparison – Radiohead are infinitely superior to U2) – surpasses not only "Pablo Honey", but also anything that Gene, Marion or the still-fictional Lesley are ever likely to come up with. It is the most naked and instinctively passionate album you're likely to hear all year. You immediately empathise with every lyric. It is quite simply a superb collection of songs. On the basis of it, Thom Yorke is one of the best songwriters alive, and Jonny Greenwood one of the most original guitarists.

"I love life," repeats Thom. "I really do love life."

And the "but"s; Thom reckons they're the same "but"s we all have.

Thom Yorke, 26, is, we believe, a survivor who guilelessly resembles a victim. This will take him far.

A SHORT history of Radiohead.

Thom met bassist Colin Greenwood at Abingdon, a minor public school on the outskirts of Oxford. Thom loathed the place. It felt more like long-term incarceration than education. Thom and Colin used to gatecrash the same parties, Colin in a bodystocking and beret, Thom, tiny, skinny, blind with mascara, dumb with lipstick, rattling around inside an oversize dinner jacket. The only reason they went to the parties at all was to be seen, and even more importantly, heard. They would hijack the record player, remove whatever current pop hit was playing, and replace it with Joy Division or Magazine's "Real Life" (Thom: "The reason we got John Leckie in to produce the album had nothing to do with 'The Stone Roses' and everything to do with 'Real Life'. One of the greatest records ever made.") Were it not for their appearance, they would have been a total downer. It's amazing they weren't beaten up more often than they were. One of the people who would use them as tom-toms was Phil Selway, now Radiohead's drummer.

They did have one thing going for them. Never, ever did they attempt to chat up any girls. Thom claims that a good deal of his life has been spent avoiding girls. More particularly, avoiding chatting them up.

Eventually, Colin met guitarist Ed O'Brien during a school production of Gilbert & Sullivan's "Trial By Jury". Thom, who'd wanted to be in a band for as long as he could remember, got them all together. They would play anything from ska to country, often simultaneously. They rehearsed on Friday evenings, so they called themselves On A Friday. Colin's little brother Jonny, then 14 and a viola player in the Thames Vale Youth Orchestra, hung around rehearsals until they let him join. His slews of guitar, Thom reckons, would become Radiohead's trademark.

They all went to college. Inconveniently, they all went to different colleges. They would meet during the vacations to practice. Jonny, the baby, was in his first term at Oxford Poly when the band were signed. Jonny, by the way, is the one who regularly receives proposals of marriage and other things from 15-year-old nymphets; all of which, he says, he chivalrously refuses.

Then came "Creep", followed by "Pablo Honey". America loved them. Fame kissed them.

A SHORT essay about nihilism.

Nihilism as an intellectual pursuit (it was never much of a concept) was popularised by a bloke called Bakunin. Bakunin was one of those speccy intellectuals Russia produces every century or so, who wander around giving people amazingly good reasons to blow things up. Not that the Russians have ever needed a great deal of encouragement.

Curly-haired spiv, chancer and rock'n'roll manager Malcolm McLaren was, and doubtless remains, an admirer of Bakunin. So too was Richard Hell, one of McLaren's earliest *protégés*. Richard (Rick to his buddies), under the tutorship of McLaren, became one of rock's first cerebral nihilists. He ripped his T-shirt, spiked his hair, didn't eat very much, and is said to have coined the phrase "blank generation". The difference between cerebral and emotional nihilism is best demonstrated by comparing Hell with yet another of McLaren's finds, Sid Vicious (known simply as Sid – he didn't have any buddies). The story is told of how one day Rick was wandering around in one of his famously naughty nihilist T-shirts,

ATALE

RADIOHEAD are being called the U2 it's okay to like, the band most likely to grow from indie dwarves to stadium giants. But, as with the other big groups of the day, from Nirvana to Manic Street Preachers, there is a black side to the white light/white heat of acclaim. THE STUD BROTHERS meet head 'Head THOM YORKE on the release of the band's new single 'Planet Telex'/'High And Dry', a man who will soon know the price of fame and who already knows the cost of being born ugly. Purple reign: STEVE GULLICK

bearing the legend, "Please kill me". A fellow disciple of Bakunin helpfully offered to do just that. So convincing was he that, within seconds Rick, who had reasoned himself into the idea, reasoned himself out of it with the speed and unerring logic of a pocket calculator, and fell to his knees begging for his life. Rick now lives in a New York loft apartment and hangs out with Sonic Youth. Sid, on the other hand, never thought much beyond his next fix, and is thought to have murdered the only person he ever held any affection for, his girlfriend Nancy Spungen. Sid, long since dead of an overdose, is far better and more fondly remembered than Rick.

Nihilism is chic. It always has been, despite or maybe because of the fact that genuine nihilists tend to wind up very dead very quickly. Irony of ironies, what we think of as nihilism, and attribute to the likes of Kurt, Richey and Thom, is exactly the opposite; a surfeit of idealism, an abundance and generosity of spirit that is absolutely doomed to be thwarted.

When our nihil desperadoes develop, as they so often do, drink or drug habits of frightening proportions, it's not out of artistic impulse. Nor is it because life has no meaning for them. It's because life is ugly, haphazard, unforgiving, unpalatable. Life, as it stands, can kill. So you get out of it. Kurt didn't take drugs out of a Doorsian impulse for transcendence. Richey hasn't wound up receiving treatment for alcohol abuse because he thought alcohol was a great way to write, what Hemingway called "a mental laxative" (apt, really, when one considers the shit Hemingway wrote). Both are or were looking for heavy-duty insulation. It's no surprise to learn that on Radiohead's recent world tour, Thom, who until now had a reputation for being the cleanest living of all pop stars, collapsed in a hotel reception from what is euphemistically known as nervous exhaustion.

"All that stuff about us drinking tea after gigs, well, it's not so true any more. The one thing you can do on tour is drink. You drink out of boredom and frustration. It makes things a f*** of a lot easier."

"CREEP". Thom, like a superstitious typecast thespian talking of "the Scottish play", prefers to call it "that song". It turned Radiohead from a minor-league indie band into world-class heavyweight contenders. Briefly. There was no follow-up hit. In the States, according to Thom, they became "That band that did 'Creep'". According to Thom, he became "The 'Creep' guy". "Hey, aren't you the 'Creep' guy?" asked receptionists, shopkeepers, just about everybody.

"It's a brilliant song," says Thom, "but we do have others. We have f***ing others."

Here's how it happens. Thom gets kicked over by girl. He writes song, one of the most heartfelt he has ever written. Later, after its UK re-release, Thom is asked by journalist if he believes girl has ever heard it. No, says Thom, and even if she had she probably wouldn't give a toss. For him, that feeling adds even more resonance to the song. But here's the funny bit. The song, for all its bitter self-recrimination, has turned Thom into a sex symbol. He no longer needs to feel ugly, twisted, because in pop, beauty really is in the eye of the beholder, and the more who behold you, the more beautiful, the more desirable you are. These are the mechanics of rock, something Cobain vaguely assumed to be connected with corporations, multinationals, bad guys with ponytails and Armani suits. In fact, it's about melodies.

Thom and Jonny, survivors in a nihilistic age. Or are they?

Powerchords. Cheekbones. Lyricism. The men in Armani suits come later, and only do what men in Armani suits always do.

Here, again, is how it happens. You write a song. You try to express your most overwhelming feelings – in Thom's case, your most bitter, repellent feelings – in the purest way you know. Immediately, unwittingly, you've betrayed those feelings. You've dramatised them. With "Creep", or with "Fake Plastic Trees", a future Radiohead single, or current single "High And Dry", you've rendered that ugliness beautiful, desirable. Add to that professional sleeve designs, well-crafted stagelighting, sumptuously shot videos on the ever-more-powerful MTV – even this feature – and you make those emotions thrilling. As you are elevated, the feelings that inspired your songs, your songs themselves, are somehow demeaned. This is not merely the process of the industry. It's the nature of the medium. Pop turns even the darkest feelings of its most sincere purveyors into a photogenic, consumable pose. Jonny's savage squalls of guitar may have originally been intended as vandalism, an attempt to sabotage this effect. Inevitably, they only add to it.

Sioux Indians will not allow their photographs to be taken, for fear of losing their souls to the camera. With Sioux Indians, it's just a superstition. With pop stars, it's a fact.

AND then, of course, there's the industry on top of that. The men in Armani suits.

"We were in New Zealand," Thom recounts. "We were taken to one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen in my life, the place where they filmed 'The Piano'. And there I was, thinking, 'This is wonderful. I don't think I've ever seen scenery so spectacular.' And suddenly it occurred to me that the only reason we were there was because. . . I can't put my finger on it, but something to do with the industry. A lot to do with MTV. And wherever you see MTV, there is a Coca-Cola machine right next to it. And I just felt like we were a part of

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– Thom Yorke

it all.
And all
at once, the view lost all meaning."

If the music business can flatten even the crenellated coastline of New Zealand, then think what it can do the person. Think what it can do to their songs.

"I know the reason we're here," asserts Thom. "It's because, in one guise or another, we've always written screaming pop songs. We were always aware that any one of our songs goes so much further than other people's. We've always been aware of just being a pop band. But that's because of the way we write and the way we perform. It happened by accident. We didn't intend to be in a pop band, we just happened to be in one. Now that ought to be enough. But for some of the people we meet, it's not.

"What I'm getting at," he explains, "is that we're releasing 'Fake Plastic Trees' as a single in America, and Capitol have remixed it. But it isn't as good as the original. The record company want us to release the remix, because they say it would suit American radio better. But that's a line we can't cross. I mean, it's a beautiful song as it stands. If it doesn't get on the radio the way it is now, then I don't think it's going to get on the radio at all. There's nothing anyone can do to it. And that really scares the shit out of me. I mean, if there's one reason I'd give up this business, it's because people will try to f*** with your stuff to fit a formula. People say it won't work on the radio, but I have no f***ing idea what they mean. The problem is, people are so f***ing anxious now. They're worried by the idea that we might always stay 'The band who did "Creep"'. And when things get like that, they can get seriously out of control. It's very weird. Very scary."

A SHORT essay on ugliness, beauty and rejection.

Philosophers tell us that those who shy away from beauty are narrow, diminished philistine souls (or some of them do, at any rate). Feminists reckon men who run from beauty are scared and (big leap here)misogynistic. Furthermore the whole thing's a myth, a beauty myth, a social construct. Boys know better. Boys know that beauty is real, appallingly fake, eternal, ephemeral, the most satisfying thing in the world and the surest way to a f***-up. Beauty is the swiftest route to self-loathing. Boys know that they want
it, that they can't possess it themselves, that to seek it in others is exciting, fraught, dangerous. Boys know a lot.

"I resent beauty," says Thom, considering the subject of "Fake Plastic Trees". "And when I say beauty, I'm not referring to men. Women, that's what I mean. That narrows the boundaries a little. Confronted by a beautiful woman, I will leave as soon as possible, or hide in a corner until they leave. It's not just that I find them intimidating. Its the hideous way people flock around them. The way people act in front of them. The way they're allowed to believe they're being so f***ing clever. Beauty is all about unearnt privilege and power. I am entirely cynical about it.

"I've never met a single beautiful woman I've actually liked," Thom continues. "You never actually get close enough to them to work out what the f*** they're about. I think a part of me used to want to know that, but I've lost all will to do so now."

Maybe if Thom ever got close enough to find out, he would find out that the beautiful feel the same way everybody else does. Or maybe all he would discover is that the beautiful now number him as one of their own. Fame can do that for you. If it can do it for Phil Collins it can sure as hell do it for Thom. No problem. Beauty is the stake through Radiohead's heart. They are the epitome of what David Bennun a fortnight ago labelled the "Ugly Boy Syndrome".

"It's not just beautiful women," confesses Thom. "I totally fear women. I fear all women. Ever since I've been at school. I would go for five months without talking to a girl my own age. I don't think it's misogyny. It's the *total opposite. It's blatant fear."*

Do you feel ugly?

"Of course I feel ugly," says Thom, looking us in the eye – even fronting us – for the first time today. "Everybody feels ugly at some point in their lives. Don't you?"

Yes. But we were fortunate enough to have been brought up among women. Lots of women. We're not afraid. . .

"Lucky f***ing you!" he laughs.

Thom's girlfriend, who he's been seeing since his college days, initially couldn't bear him.

"She really thought I was a freak," he admits. "She thought I was impossible to talk to, really moody, difficult, unpleasant and idiotic. And I think I was. But she bashed a lot of that crap out of me."

Who pursued who?

"I pursued her, but in all the wrong ways, because I was. . . terrified of her. You're always terrified of the ones you fancy, yeah? But in my funny way I was very tenacious. It worked out. But she did think I was a freak."

Has it occurred to you that your songs might be about the conflict between beauty and ugliness, beauty and yourself?

"Yeah, I suppose you're right," he says. "It never actually occurred to me that there was some sort of theme to our songs, but yeah, yeah, you may well be right. But I'd like to be remembered for a little bit more than that. Not just remembered as the guy with the underlying fear of women."

YOU might say that Thom needs to grow up. Wrong. We have too many grown-ups cluttering up this business as it is. Why can't fame pick a few of them off?

Fame, we must surmise, has better taste.

'High And Dry'/'Planet Telex' is out now on Parlophone